

[Flooding Creates Potential Human Health and Recreational Risks in Rivers Across Montana | Montana DEQ \(mt.gov\)](#)

River recreators should avoid contact with water during and after flood events. Floodwaters can carry potentially dangerous debris and may contain chemicals and bacteria from damaged or overwhelmed wastewater treatment facilities and flooded homes, businesses, and agricultural fields.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has issued closures for Fishing Access Sites along the Stillwater, Yellowstone and Rivers due to safety hazards related to collapsing banks, debris jams, and exposed or submerged infrastructure (myfwp.mt.gov/fwpPub/allRestrictions). Sites are being reopened on a case-by-case basis as site conditions and safety concerns allow.

“It’s likely more floating and boating hazards will emerge as waters recede,” said Hope Stockwell, Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division Administrator. **“We’re opening sites as quickly as possible, but boaters and other recreators should still use an abundance of caution when on the water.”**

Recreationists should also be aware that rivers and creeks could be contaminated with harmful bacteria. This is especially true downstream of communities where widespread flooding occurred because water treatment systems may take time to return to normal operation even after floodwaters recede.

The Department of Environmental Quality monitors water quality across the state and will conduct additional floodwater monitoring in areas where monitoring projects are already ongoing, such as the Yellowstone River basins. While this may help identify contamination, sampling will not determine the source of contaminants – whether it is from overwhelmed water treatment facilities or general runoff from other dispersed sources.

“Even during moderate rain events, it’s common to find high levels of *E. coli* bacteria in rivers and creeks,” said Darrin Kron, DEQ Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Section Supervisor. **“With historic rain and flood events occurring in parts of Montana, people should take extra precautions and avoid drinking, fishing, and swimming in rivers after flooding.”**

Floodwaters contain many things that may harm health. <https://dphhs.mt.gov>

We don’t know exactly what is in floodwater at any given point in time. Floodwater can contain:

- Downed power lines
- Human and livestock waste
- Household, medical, and industrial hazardous waste (chemical, biological, and radiological)

- Coal ash waste that can contain carcinogenic compounds such as arsenic, chromium, and mercury
- Other contaminants that can lead to illness
- Physical objects such as lumber, vehicles, and debris
- Wild or stray animals such as rodents and snakes

Exposure to contaminated floodwater can cause:

- Wound infections
- Skin rash
- Gastrointestinal illness
- Tetanus
- Leptospirosis (not common)

It is important to protect yourself from exposure to floodwater regardless of the source of contamination. The best way to protect yourself is to stay out of the water.